

by Lt. Rich Shettler

It was a normal flight, a six-hour random track from Travis AFB to NAS Patuxent River, where we forward-deploy to an alert facility. We were talking to Washington Center, and about 70 miles from the field we received an en-route descent to Patuxent. We got landing weather and called for descent checks.

We finished the approach brief and computed landing data. A commonly flown TACAN approach to runway 32; nothing new, done it a hundred times. Weather was clear and a million, with winds 340 at 12 knots. Another landing into the black hole, as we like to call it. Runway 32 at Pax River has no VASI, and there is only water before the threshold, making short-final look like you're flying inside a black hole.

We configured the aircraft with gear and flaps and called the FAF with the gear. At two miles, we asked if the arresting gear was rigged. Tower replied it was rigged approximately 3,000 feet from the approach threshold. We planned to touch down about 1,500 feet from the threshold and simply roll over the gear.

The aircraft crossed the threshold at 50 feet and the landing lights illuminated the numbers and fixed distance markers. The main gear touched down approximately 1,500 feet from the threshold.

As I flew the nose to the runway, I deployed the speed brakes and pulled the four reverse levers to idle. Suddenly, my normal landing was no longer normal. Looking down the runway, I noticed at first what I thought was a dog about 2,000 feet in front of us. As the nosegear touched down, the landing light illuminated something much bigger than a dog. A deer had decided that an airfield would be a good place to call home. It found itself on the same runway with a monster airplane going 130 mph.

I called across cockpit that we had a deer. I made no attempt to change my ground path and hoped this one had nine lives and could duck the one-foot-ten-inch


clearance of the No. 3 engine before dodging the main gear and flaps.

After passing the large animal, I got on the brakes at approximately 100 knots, slowing the aircraft and scanning the No.3 and No.4 engine instruments. I didn't see any abnormal indications.

We notified tower as we rolled to the end of the runway and exited onto the taxiway. The postflight inspection of the aircraft and runway revealed that this was indeed a deer with another day to live. No evidence of the deer was found. Apparently, Bambi passed between the No.3 and No. 4 engines, missing the trailing-edge flaps.

Lessons learned? We have had this same story before but that buck wasn't quite as lucky as my lady deer. That time, the main gear hit the deer, leaving no significant damage but requiring a hose and a lot of cleaning time. We were lucky that in both cases neither the inboard or outboard engines hit the deer.

The E-6A's CFM-56 engine runs about five million dollars a copy, and I don't believe making a milk shake out of a deer could be a good thing for a high-bypass jet engine.

We've practiced solutions in the past but we sometimes forget. Ask ground crews to make a deer sweep during night landings at Patuxent River. This 10-minute procedure could save hundreds of manhours and thousands of dollars. 

Lt. Shettler flies with VQ-4.

Deer *in the* Landing Lights



Photo-composite by Allan Amen